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Napa's Family Winemakers

By Katie Benner

If you want to eat Michael Chiarello's food, you need a great imagination. The celebrity chef, who hosts the Emmy-winning *Easy Entertaining* on the Food Network and who helped put Napa-style dining on the map, hasn't manned a restaurant kitchen in about a decade.



Corison Kronos Vineyard Cabernet, Napa Valley 2002, \$98
The wines Cathy Corison, above, produces are a joy to drink because she takes such pleasure in creating a bottle that reflects the personality of each growing season, making it well worth the

Or you can buy a case of one of the five wines he grows at his St. Helena, Calif., vineyard. Pick it up at his house and have a home-cooked meal with his wife, family and 100 other buyers from around the country at one of his biannual celebrations of food, wine and the lives of small vintners in a valley of big players.

His latest harvest celebration included braised rabbit bruschetta with fig conserva and crispy rosemary, followed by lamb shanks and a rich, heavenly and heart-rate-raising pumpkin polenta. The feast was toasted by guests hailing from Long Island, Texas and all points in between. Of course, Chiarello's wines anointed the table, nestled among the vineyard rows, just beyond the chef's own backyard.

Sure, Napa Valley is home to Mondavi and Coppola, dramatic views at Sterling Vineyards and historic architecture at Chateau Montelena. But for the

more adventurous, it is also home to smaller vintners willing to get to know you on a first-name basis, and offering a one-of-a-kind experience upon your visit.

"If you start to include family vineyards in your trip to Napa, it's the difference between going on safari and going to the zoo," says Chiarello. "People are making wines from their soul again. Big wineries create bottles that taste perfect, the same every year, and this is good. But with a small operation, over time you can taste so much more than the wine. You can taste winemakers making choices in the field. It's about agriculture again ... and that is better than perfect."

Cathy Corison agrees. She moved to the valley 31 years ago with a degree in biology and a desire to make world-class wine. After a stint as a "hired gun that made wine for the guys with money," she produced her first vintage under her own Corison label in 1987.

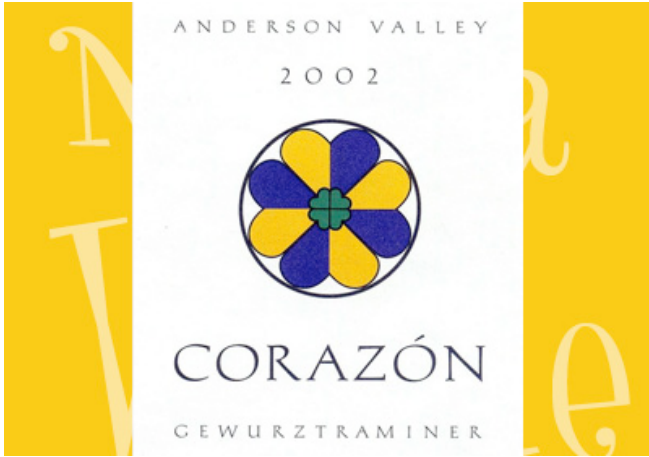
"Every year I make wine more intuitively and I believe winemaking reflects the hand of the person," she says. "Good wine can be made by committee, but I don't believe you can make great wine by committee."

Face-to-face with her tremendous efforts and intangible artistry, people buy her wine because they believe in her ability to wrestle an amazing bottle from the land, no matter the growing season.

"The best winemakers understand their vineyards," says **Oscar Renteria**, who runs Renteria Vineyard Management and makes wine under his family's *Salva Tierra* and *Tres Perlas* labels. Renteria should know the land better than most. His father, Salvador Renteria,

came from Mexico in 1962 to work at Sterling Vineyards as a field laborer; his genius for agriculture allowed him to rise through the ranks and establish, in 1987, one of the valley's most respected vineyard management companies. When he retired, he was honored by Copia, the American Center for Wine, Food and the Arts, for his life's work.

“These are the stories that make this valley what it really is,” says Chiarello. “There’s so much more diversity and adventure going on here than what you see on the surface.”



Corazon Gewürztraminer, Alexander Valley 2003, \$25
Cathy Corison creates a crisp, dry, aromatic, fun to drink gewürztraminer with flavors of pear, flowers and grapefruit. It’s balanced by a snappy acidity but is still rich on the palate and perfectly balanced.

Appealing as these stories are, it’s not easy to know which switchback roads to brave to taste the rare and the unknown. Enter the Vintner’s Collective in downtown Napa, a multi-winery tasting room that shows off some of the region’s best vintners including D-Cubed, Vinoce, Brown Estates, Chiarello and Philippe Melka, *Food & Wine* magazine’s 2005 Winemaker of the Year. A visitor can relax in the breezy room, discover a cult winemaker and gather the necessary information for a visit.

“These multi-winery tasting rooms didn’t really exist 10 years ago, but now there are so many small vineyards that can’t have a tasting room that these are becoming very popular,” Murphy says. “Those vintners will make some of the most fabulous wines around. However, it will take a tasting room like this to put that fruit in front of the public.”

And the vintners themselves aid in the exploration process, freely recommending favorite winemakers, vineyards and out-of-the-way food and wine experiences.

“We’re not really competitors here because everybody helps everybody out,” says **Frank Dotzler**, proprietor of Outpost, which is situated atop Howell Mountain. He’s moving among the fermentation tanks at his custom crush facility where other small vintners, including Chiarello, bring their fruit to be processed. It’s a practice that allows smaller players to share the cost of top-line equipment and facilities.

Dotzler, who left a computer business in Chicago before embarking on a winemaking career, has a crew that includes a hedge fund refugee, but this is not unusual in a valley that has long lured people from their workday lives with romanticized notions of vineyards and craftsmanship. But it only rewards those who can endure the hard work.

Jon Leahy, associate winemaker at Fantesca Estate & Winery, left a \$200,000 salary to pull in less than \$10 an hour while he learned the art of winemaking. He now works for Duane and Susan Hoffs, who are extricating themselves from the upper echelons at **Best Buy** (nyse: [BBY - news - people](#)) to grow grapes. Steve Reynolds, a former dentist, built the Reynolds Family Winery, and he makes some of the finest reds you’ll be lucky to try.

The payoff for the traveler who spends time with these vintners is that feeling of community and of mutual appreciation. As Chiarello chats up his guests, he seems genuinely grateful that there are customers who want to drink “the story of a year on his land.” His guests seem grateful to be there, and everyone leaves feeling like they’re part of the family business. You’ll never leave Niebaum-Coppola feeling like you just spent time at the table with Francis Ford, but in the world of the small vintner, travelers get a taste of family before moving on to the next destination.